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THE PETTY TYRANTS OF AMERICA.

BY MAX O'RELL.

It may be asserted that national pride causes every people on the face of the earth to labor under a delusion. The Frenchman honestly believes himself to be the only truly civilized inhabitant of the globe ; the Englishman thinks he is the only moral one ; and I have no doubt that the American flatters himself that he is the freest. Possibly the Sandwich Islander uses, in reference to himself, some adjective in the superlative, followed by *in the world*, according to American fashion.

Now, as a true-born Frenchman, I am ready to admit that my countrymen express a very fair estimation of themselves ; but I hold that the pharisaism of the English is obvious ; and as for the Americans being a free nation, why, I maintain that never was a greater mistake made in the world.

I will leave politics alone, although I might tell Jonathan that the governments of England and France, especially of England, are far less autocratic than his. I will leave aside the trusts, the rings, the combinations, the leaders, the bosses, but only name them to take the opportunity of reminding Jonathan that, if the greatest objection to a monarchy is that a nation may thus run the risk of being ruled by a fool or a scoundrel, the greatest objection to certain forms of democracy should be that a nation may thus run the risk of being governed by 500 of such. A great English lord was one day confidentially informed that his steward robbed him. "I know it," he replied ; "but my steward sees that nobody else robs me." That English lord was a wise man. And, as for costs, I believe that enough money is spent and enough business is stopped during a presidential campaign in America to keep all the crowned heads of Europe during the four years of the President's time of office.

But enough, I repeat, about politics.

I say that Jonathan is not a freeman because he is not the master in his own house. Whether he travels or stays at home, he is ruled and bullied and snubbed from morning till he goes to sleep. His disposition is that of an angel, and, whenever I am asked what struck me most in the course of my visits to the United States, I always answer : "I never once saw an American lose his temper."

The American is not a man of leisure. His mind is always on the alert. New schemes are forever trotting about his brains. He is full of business, and trifles do not concern him. Besides, he may happen to dwell at No. 3479 West 178th Street, and he must try to remember where he lives. So he pockets snubs and kicks, and forgets. To lodge a complaint against a rude conductor or an uncivil porter would mean a letter to write or a visit to pay; too much waste of time. "Bother it!" he exclaims, "let him be hanged by somebody else!" He is also a prince of good fellows, and a complaint may mean the discharge of a man with a wife and children.

But this is not the principal reason. The Americans, like the French, have no initiative and lack public spirit. The English are the only people who are served by their servants, let the servants be the ministers of the crown, the directors of public companies, or mere railway porters. To every one to whom John Bull pays a salary he says : "Please to remember that you are the servant of the public." When the English appoint a new official, high or low, it is a new servant that they add to their household. When the French and the Americans appoint a new official, it is a new master that they give to themselves to snub them and to bully them. For example, when the English railway companies started running sleeping cars, the public said to them : "We do not wish to be herded up together like hop-pickers, you will please have the cars divided at night into two parts by a curtain, so that our ladies may be spared the annoyance of having to share a section with a man." I do not know a single American lady who has not told me of that grievance, and how on that account she dreaded travelling alone. Yet I am not aware that the American public has ever told the officials of any railway company in this country : "We pay you, and you shall, please, give such accommodation as will secure the comfort of our women." On one occasion, in a crowded sleeping car from

Syracuse to New York, I occupied an upper berth, and a lady occupied the lower one. If she only felt half as uncomfortable as I did, I pity the poor woman.

Coming from Washington to New York, a short time ago, every seat in the drawing-room car was occupied. The temperature of that car was about 80. The perspiration was trickling down the cheeks of the passengers, the women were fanning themselves with newspapers, all were stifled, puffing and blowing, hardly able to breathe; but not one dared go and open the ventilators, not one said to the conductor: "Now, this is perfectly unendurable, please to open the ventilators at once." I took upon myself to go and address him; "Don't you think," I timidly ventured, "that this car is much too hot?" "I do not," he said, and he walked away. As I meant to arrive in New York alive, I opened, not the ventilator, but my window. That was a reckless, fool-hardy resolution. The passengers threw at me a glance of gratitude, but there was in that glance an expression of wonder at my wild temerity, and they looked sideways, forward and backwards, to see if the potentate of the train had seen me. I was fairly roused, I was sick, my head was burning, almost split, and I was ready for that conductor if he had come to close my window—and that at the risk of passing for some uncontrollable rebel. The railways of this country are ruled by the nigger and for the nigger.

Then there is the man who, every five minutes, bangs the door of the car with all his might to let you know he has arrived. He will wake you up from a refreshing nap by a tap on your shoulder to inform you that he has laid a magazine on your lap. Then he will return with chewing-gum, then with papers, then with bananas, apples and oranges, then with skull caps, then with books, then with ten-cent pieces of jewelry, from his inexhaustible stores. An Englishman, on whom this kind of unceasing boredom from the time the train starts till the time when it reaches its destination would be tried, would pitch the boy out of the window.

Then there is the refreshment room. You ask for refreshment and you name what you would like to have, and you receive the refreshing answer, invariably accompanied by a frown: "What's that?" You apologize for the poor English you have at your disposal, especially if you have acquired it in England, and you prepare to enjoy a piece of custard pie or apple pie, or

may be, doughnuts. On leaving the place you pay, and the man at the desk would feel dishonored if he said "Thanks" to you ; but I will say this for him that he so little expects thanks for what he brings to you or does for you that if you say, "*Thank you,*" he will cry, "You're welcome," in the tone of, "*What's the matter with you ?*" Life is short, time is money, and all these little amenities of European life are dispensed with.

You leave the train and arrive in the hotel. From the tender mercies of the railway conductor you are handed over to the hotel clerk, and, in small towns, to the lady waitress. Not a smile on that clerk's face. He is placid, solemn and monosyllabic. Your name entered on the registry, your sentence is pronounced. You are no longer Mr. So-and-So, you are No. 219. The colored gentleman is close by to carry out the sentence. He bids you follow him. Yours is not to ask questions ; yours is to follow and obey. The rules of the penitentiary are printed in your bedroom. You shall be hungry from 8 to 10 A. M., from 1 to 3 P. M., and from 6 to 8 P. M. The slightest infringement of the rules would be followed by the declaration that you are a crank. At the entrance of the dining-room, the head waiter, or the lady head waitress, holds up the hand and bids you follow him or her. Perhaps you recognize a friendly face at one of the tables. Yours is not to indulge in feelings of that sort ; yours is again to follow, obey, and take the seat that is assigned to you. During the whole time that altogether I have spent in America I never once saw an American man or woman who dared sit on any other chair than the one that he or she was ordered to occupy. Nay, I have seen the guests timidly wait at the door, when nobody was there to take them in charge, until some one came to order them about. In small hotels you cannot hope to have the courses brought one after the other so that each one may be served hot to you. Your plate is placed in front of you, and the lady waitress disposes symmetrically ten to fifteen little oval dishes around it. When I first made the acquaintance of this lady, and she had dealt the dishes, I exclaimed, looking at her : "Hallo ! what's trump ?" But there was no trifling with that lady ; she threw at me a glance that made me feel the abomination of my conduct.

Complaints are so rare that I once witnessed, in a hotel, a perfect commotion started by an Englishman who had dared

express his dissatisfaction at the way he was treated. He was in the hall. "This is the worst managed hotel I have ever been in," he exclaimed to the clerk. "Where is the proprietor? I should like to speak to him." The proprietor was in the hall, thoroughly enjoying the scene. He was pointed out to the guest by the clerk. The Englishman, excited and angry, went up to the proprietor.

"Is it you who are running this house?" he said.

"Well," said the proprietor, with his cigar in his mouth and his hands in his pockets, "I thought I was—till you came."

The Englishman looked at him, turned back, paid his bill, and departed.

I am bound to admit that the incivility you meet with in many hotels, offices, shops, etc., is only apparent. They are busy, mad busy, those clerks and shopmen, and do not see why they should indulge in the thousands of petty acts of courtesy that customers expect in Europe, where, for example, shopkeepers have time to write long notices to "respectfully beg the public not to touch the articles exposed for sale." In America, "Hands off" answers the purpose, and the visitors do not feel insulted.

But among the lower class servants of the public, I am persuaded that incivility is simply a form of misunderstood democracy. "I am as good as you" is their motto, and by being polite they would fear to appear servile. They are not as good as you, however, because you are polite to them, and they are not polite to you but they do not see that. It is not equality, it is tyranny, the worst of tyranny, tyranny from below.

The patience of the American public is simply angelical, nothing short of that. I have seen American audiences kept waiting by theatrical companies more than half an hour. Something was wrong behind the scenes. They manifested no sign of impatience. When the curtain rose, nobody came forward to apologize to them for this obvious want of respect. Once in a New England town, through a train's being late, I arrived at the Opera House three-quarters of an hour after the time my lecture was advertised to begin. "I suppose I had better apologize to the audience," I said to the local manager, "and explain to them why I am late." "Just as you please," he replied, "but I would not. I guess they would have waited another half an hour

without showing any sign of impatience." The American public expect no courtesy from the people they pay, and they get none.

The people of culture and refinement in America are paying dearly for keeping aloof from politics, and refusing to have anything to do with the government of their country. They are beginning to realize that fact. In everyday life their apathy, their lack of initiative alone can explain their endurance of the petty tyrannies I have only just indicated in these remarks.

If every official were educated up to the fact that he is paid by the state, that is to say, by the people, and that his duty is to administer, to the best of his abilities, to the welfare of the people ; if every conductor of every railway company were made to understand that his first function is to attend to the comfort and wishes of passengers ; if waiters, waitresses, porters, servants of all sorts, were told that a polite public has a right to expect from them politeness, courtesy and good service, life in America would be a great deal happier.

Americans may say that all this is beneath their notice, but they suffer from it. I do not think that I am one of those Europeans who believe that nothing is done well unless it is done in European fashion. I cannot help thinking that a good deal of happiness is attained in life by amiable intercourse with the people of all the different stations with whom we have to come in contact.

MAX O'RELL.